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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PARM](#) [PREL](#) [KPAO](#) [IT](#) [NATO](#) [FORCES](#) [IN](#) [ITALY](#)

SUBJECT: ITALIAN MILITARY OFFICIALS GENERALLY ON BOARD WITH POSSIBLE US MILITARY CHANGES IN ITALY

REF: A. STATE 174698

[B](#). ROME 3138

[C](#). ROME 2631

Classified By: Charge Emil Skodon for reasons 1.5 (a) and (b).

[1](#)1. (S) Summary. In recent meetings with senior Italian military officials, Charge discussed upcoming changes in the US military footprint in Italy. Overall, the reaction was positive -- the officials agreed that the proposed changes make sense from an operational point of view. However, they noted that some issues, especially regarding operating conditions, are politically extremely sensitive and will be tricky to resolve, especially if the US insists on the right to unilateral deployment. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Charge accompanied NAVEUR Commander Admiral Grog Johnson to an August 31 meeting with Italian Chief of Defense (CHOD) Admiral Paolo Di Paola to discuss the US Navy's transformation in Europe and its implications for Italy. Charge, accompanied by Pol M/C and Econ M/C, also discussed proposed changes to the US military presence in Italy with PM Berlusconi's new Military Advisor, Alberto Ficuciello, on September 2.

Naples and Gaeta -- smooth sailing ahead

[1](#)3. (C) Adm. Johnson's message to the Italian CHOD was that the US Navy's transformation in the European theater is already underway. Di Paola was well aware of and appeared at ease with the proposed changes in Naples (moving NAVEUR and Commander Navy Europe (CNE) from London and consolidating with Sixth Fleet headquarters). Likewise, the relocation of the Sixth Fleet Command Staff to Naples -- leaving only the flag ship in Gaeta -- did not appear to be of major concern. Although in a briefing to the Embassy country team a few weeks earlier Johnson had expressed concern that the downsizing at Gaeta had not been discussed officially with local officials, Di Paola seemed relatively unconcerned about the impact on the local economy, noting that there was plenty of tourism and other activities to support economic growth.

Vicenza and Sigonella -- careful navigation needed

[1](#)4. (S) Di Paola asked for an update on Vicenza and Sigonella. He noted that with Vicenza, if the US Army's intent is merely to increase the numbers of SETAF military personnel under existing operating conditions (from the current ceiling of 2,900 to approximately 4,000 troops), this was a simple matter. If, on the other hand, the US was looking to change the operating conditions, including the right to deploy, as A/S Bloomfield had discussed during his June visit (Ref C), then we needed to reach a "political understanding" before any changes take place. (Note: US Army and Italian Defense General Staff colonels will meet in Rome September 10 to discuss possible expansion of the US presence in Vicenza to the Italian airbase at Dal Molin. End note.)

[1](#)5. (S) Consolidating Special Operations Forces (SOF) at Sigonella, Di Paola continued, will certainly require some sort of political agreement, especially regarding freedom to deploy, since the existing Base Infrastructure Agreements (BIAs) governing the presence of US forces in Italy foresee their use only for NATO-related purposes. He repeated the Italian government's view that trying to renegotiate the BIA would spark a political controversy, even in the current pro-Bush political climate, and probably leave the US worse off. Di Paola reiterated his hope that Italy could find a way under existing agreements to accommodate US rapid-response type movements.

[1](#)6. (S) In the meeting with Ficuciello, the PM's Military Advisor commented that consolidation of SOF in Sigonella made sense from an operational point of view and would provide increased opportunities for bilateral training.

[1](#)7. (S) Charge stressed in both meetings that the US government is still debating the issue, noting that SOCOM Commander General Brown is visiting Sigonella this week. He said that if a decision is made to go ahead, many details will have to be worked out with the Italian host government. The US also prefers to avoid renegotiating existing basing agreements. He repeated our message that the US will

continue to consult closely with the Italian host government as thinking on these issues progress. He noted that a high-level US delegation probably will visit Rome this fall to discuss these issues further.

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